

THE UNITED STATES ARMY CHAPLAIN CENTER AND SCHOOL

GROUP DECISION MAKING
A METHOD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF USACHCS IN PARTIAL COMPLETION
OF THE C-22 CLASS WRITING
REQUIREMENT

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FORT WADSWORTH, NEW YORK

13 MARCH 1975

The long list of recommended topics for the Officer Advanced Course writing project is a testimonial to the complexity of the world in which we live and to the problems chaplains face. This growing realization convinces this writer that chaplains need an adequate problem solving methodology. Alvin Toffler in Future Shock has clearly shown us that problems faced today may no longer be problems tomorrow. Because of cultural lag, one is in danger of working on yesterday's problems today while using last week's methods for finding solutions. It is imperative that one deal with problem solving methodology as it relates to the chaplaincy in a rapidly changing world. This paper is a practical effort to forward some suggestions and to increase awareness of strengths, weaknesses, and dangers inherent in group decision making. This subject is of particular interest to those at the Chaplain's Advanced Course where assignments are by "group process."

Irving L. Janis in Group Think writes with fascination about decision which led our country into catastrophic activities. Just as highly trained men like Presidential advisors and General Officers are sometimes unable to make knowledgeable decisions (as evidenced by Pearl Harbor, the Korean War, and the Viet Nam stagnation), so we often flounder in our inability to make intelligent decisions. Will the training one received in college help? What was offered in Seminary to enable one to deal with a rapidly changing set of circumstances and problems? How will a Master's

Degree in Sociology or Guidance meet the need for expertise in decision making? Finally, what has the USACHSC offered in relation to this need? To the first three questions this author must respond by saying that little was offered. The USACHSC, however, offered a course dealing with Management. Regretfully, the material was not well understood, too little time was spent, and the material which dealt with decision making was only superficial.

Several studies support the evaluation that, "It is not possible to state simply that group productivity is or is not superior to the productivity of individuals working in isolation. 'It depends!'"¹ Essentially the three major factors which must be considered in making a determination to work individually or in a group are: the resources, social motivation, and social influences.² When a task requires extensive resources and lends itself to a division of labor the group performance will most likely be superior to that of an individual. The group has greater potential than an individual to identify alternatives. The probability of random errors is less likely in the group process. Assuming that, "High productivity is rewarded by other group members, then we can generalize that the presence of other persons will increase productivity."³ Finally, the group can benefit as a

¹Barry E. Collins and Harold Guetzkow, A Social Psychology of Group Processes for Decision-Making (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), p. 15.

²Ibid., p. 52. ³Ibid., p. 53.

whole from the hard work and skill of an expert. This is especially true if the contribution is supported by evidence, is logically sound and internally consistent, and is consistent with past experience.⁴

This same author who above listed the advantages for using group decision making, emphasizes factors which give good reason for being caution. One is reminded that:

A task so structured that divisions of labor are impossible makes it difficult for the group to utilize its potentially greater resources. . . . the process of group deliberation is selective and the final group product will contain fewer alternatives than would have been generated by all the group members working separately.⁵

Group members are sometimes defensive and create a distraction from the goal of the group.

The process of social influence may decrease the quality of the group product if used unintelligently. In particular, social influence may decrease effectiveness when: (1) an expert continues to be influential outside his own areas of expert knowledge, (2) a group member conforms in order to buy social approval, (3) conformity and agreement set in so quickly that the full resources of the group are not brought to bear, and (4) group members become accustomed to depending on others and do not think and learn on their own.⁶

This paper is written with the belief that group decision making is superior and will continue as a method of management. Perhaps the most valuable effort that can be made is to (1) illustrate the procedure with a real situation, (2) present a methodology of group decision making, (3) discuss the implications of some of the weaknesses in group decision making such as consensus.

⁴Ibid., p. 53. ⁵Ibid. ⁶Ibid.

ILLUSTRATION OF A DECISION-MAKING GROUP

Theodore C. Sorensen speaks to the situation of selecting a methodology of decision making in quoting the late President Kennedy. "The heart of the Presidency is therefore informed, prudent, and resolute choice--and the secret of the Presidential enterprise is to be found in an examination of the way presidential choices are made."⁷ Sorensen gave the following steps as the ideal components to White House decision making:

- (1) There must be agreement on the facts, (2) an agreement on the overall objective must be obtained, (3) a precise definition of the problem must be worked out, (4) a canvassing of all possible solutions with all their shades and variations that would flow from each solution made clear to all, (5) a list of all the possible consequences that would flow from each solution, (6) a recommendation and final choice of one alternative, (7) the communication of that selection, and (8) provision for its execution.⁸

He reminds one that the President is deeply involved in many matters and that no decision is to be seen in isolation. The president's position is in a real world of conflicting demands, desires, goals, values, ideologies, means, and sense of timing.

Chaplains are well aware that finding hypothetical solutions to hypothetical problems in a training or school situation is vastly different to finding real solutions to real problems amid many demands, pressures, values, needs, goals, and programs which are

⁷Theodore C. Sorensen, Decision Making in the White House (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 12.

⁸Ibid., p. 19.

unrelated to, but affected by, that decision. Sorensen states that it is a law of life that every gain incurs a cost--and that the most efficient decision, therefore, is theoretically the one which produces the greatest gain over cost.⁹ Values, ethics, and morals have great implications in relation to how those who are involved in the decision process perceive what is considered to be the gain and the cost.

Dependent as the President is upon advisors, there is also the fear that group recommendations too often put a premium on consensus, in place of content; on unanimity in place of precision; on compromise in place of creativity; and that some advisers may genuinely mistake agreement for validity and coordination for policy. They look upon their own role as that of mediator, convinced that any conclusion shared by so many able minds must be right; pleased that they could in this way ease the President's problems. They may in fact have increased them.¹⁰

The message is clear enough. The President must have a good method and it must be realized that the best method available has many built-in problems.

⁹Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 60-61.

A METHODOLOGY FOR GROUP DECISION MAKING

A chaplain's occupation involves him with people in all aspects of their interrelatedness and their relatedness to God. Because of the chaplain's unique role and function in society he is called upon to help with problems which require awareness, facts, and technology which he may lack. A method of problem solving is needed to deal with those problems which are presented to him for which he now lacks solutions. Congressman Mosher also speaks of the complexity of solving major public problems.¹¹ Many people in special roles face the same problems. Assuming that the most difficult problems (namely those which affect everyone) can best be dealt with in a group, this author shall present what he feels is the most helpful.

In developing this methodology it is important to understand a few basic concepts. The first is that groups which are engaged in a win-lose conflict will not produce as good a decision as a group in a no-win no-lose posture. The term win-lose conflict means any, "Tension filled situation in which two or more groups are each competing to gain precedence over the other(s)."¹²

¹¹Charles A. Mosher, "Needs and Trends in Congressional Decision Making," Science 178 (October 6, 1972), pp. 134-138.

¹²Jacobo A. Varela, Psychological Solutions to Social Problems (New York: Academic Press, 1971), p. 146.

Solving win-lose conflicts can be achieved by establishing a superordinate goal. This is defined as a goal that is considered essential by both groups. It cannot be attained by one group alone, but can be reached if both groups work cooperatively toward its attainment. Superordinate goals give only partial success. Some of the obvious dangers are the difficulty in finding suitable superordinate goals, and the chance of fiercely competing groups banding together against a larger group--resulting in war.¹³

Varela gives further insight into the effects of win-lose conflicts. He says that a 1962 study shows:

When groups are openly competing in a win-lose situation in which the possibility of resolving differences by compromises is entirely ruled out, then each group will strongly tend to overvalue its own position and undervalue that of the opponent.¹⁴

He also cites another study that found that groups given a common fate showed significantly more cohesive behavior than those with no such common fate.¹⁵

It is of great interest that Dr. Thomas Gordon in his book Parent Effectiveness Training uses many of these same concepts but for a different group. Varela described some effects of win-lose conflicts which were observed by Blake and Mouton in 1964. No doubt most chaplains have dealt with these many times. Groups in a win-lose conflict suffer from the good guy--bad guy syndrome. The dynamics of this syndrome operate in such a way

¹³Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁵Ibid.

that anyone who suggested that the opposition has something or someone of good value is a traitor. Remarks, statements, or actions against the opponent are perceived as being the right thing to do. What the good-guy does is actually contrary to any possible solution.¹⁶

The leader's position becomes crystalized and fixed in each group as the conflict develops. Along with this crystallization is the fact that the opposing group seems to surrender their will to their own leadership in direct relationship to the degree they oppose the other group. The perception of both groups suffers with an inability to perceive reality. Each group stereotypes the other and attributes to them no redeeming qualities. Differences of opinion are emphasized.

Varela sums up what he has to say about the effects of win-lose conflicts by pointing out that it is easier to avoid these conflicts than to resolve them. In avoiding such situations he discusses various group communication networks. The following diagrams of communications are given in order of priority, from best to worst:¹⁷



¹⁶Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 151.

Using the comcon method of communication as much as possible in establishing goals for problem solving, one must realize that groups are concerned with both quality of work being performed and with personal acceptance. Maier believes that the first step in problem solving is dealing with acceptance and that the second step is then the quality of work. He feels that this will produce solutions of a higher quality than reversing the order of acceptance and quality or in dealing with them equally.¹⁸

The next phase in a methodology of problem solving is for the leader to know the group and channel the discussion in such a way that is most profitable and likely to produce solutions.

Varela says:

A skillful group leader knowing the make-up of the members of his group, can take full advantage of these differences and channel the discussion at appropriate points to the persons who have the abilities required for that phase of the solution of the problem.¹⁹

He points out that this is the opposite of brainstorming.

Perhaps one of the greatest confusions about group decision making is when to use it. Remembering what Varela said about channelling discussion to those having expertise, it is also of great interest that he cites studies which point out that when a single ability is involved, those highest in that ability should be consulted individually.²⁰ Within the group process the leader should take care not only to establish a comcon network, but he

¹⁸Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 154.

²⁰Ibid., p. 155.

should be able to relate the various phases of the problem solving process to those most capable in that area.²¹

Perhaps one of the most personally difficult areas in problem solving is summed up by Maier (1963) who said, "Problem solving is successful only if the solution reached is one that can be put into practice."²² This idea is not really different from the belief that:

Only the present and the future are subject to change, and hence only they can be controlled through decisions. The problem-solving approach, therefore, must incorporate an attitude that accepts the past and takes up the problem of what to do to reach present objectives. . . . This problem-solving attitude is not present during frustration.²³

Because, "Work expands to fill the time available," (Parkinson's Law) any group which meets to solve a problem should first estimate the amount of time they will need to do the necessary work.²⁴ After the time has been estimated, the group must define the problem. Research indicates that most groups need to suppress the urge to solve the problem and spend more time in analyzing just what the problem is. In this analysis Maier would have one realize that the location of any problem is in the situation, in an individual, and/or in a group of individuals. It is at this point that caution must be exercised as frustration causes one to blame individuals rather than situations.²⁵

Now that implications, assumptions, and some basic research

²¹Ibid., pp. 156-157.

²²Ibid., p. 157.

²³Ibid., p. 158.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 163

concerning group problem solving have been considered, one needs to deal with the actual technique from the leader's point of view. The leader must first deal with emotional climates of the group. If the group is functioning rationally the leader proceeds. If not he must deal with any irrationality prior to the business. But he looks for symptoms of aggression, regression, fixation, rationalization, and projection. These defenses are dealt with by giving real assurance, through talking out the situation, by sometimes requesting silence (the leader will usually be wise to request it for his own benefit), by using a Rogerian style of reflection, and in ways in which the leader is particularly skilled.²⁶ With the group ready to work, the skilled leader ideally proceeds through the following steps:

1. He should have a grasp of each person's abilities and be aware of how each can contribute

2. The group determines how the time is to be spent; a time contract is made

3. The problem of clarification is made using particularly those who are high in skills of divergent production or behavior and semantic units--extreme care is taken not to solve the wrong problem

4. A blackboard is helpful to keep attention focused on what is important. It is preferred for it deals honestly with

²⁶Ibid., pp. 170-173.

the problem of ownership of the presented material

5. Pro and Con listings of solutions are made; common items might indicate that the problem is not what was stated

6. The group works to obtain a comcon network

7. The leader remains involved with the process rather than with the content of the decision

8. As the blackboard is filled those ideas which are unnecessary are erased with the permission of the group or individual. Permission helps avoid becoming fixated on one idea or feeling rejection of themselves along with their idea

9. An attempt is made to retain a discussion free of a win-lose mentality. This writer feels that concepts taught in Parent Effectiveness Training and Transactional Analysis can be most beneficial

10. The decision is summarized for all in terms of what impact the decision will have

The decision to do something must involve the time allotted for it to be put into effect; what the duties will be for each member; the steps for doing and under what conditions the action will be carried out; and finally, what the follow-up and evaluation procedures will be.²⁷ This assumes that when the leader presented the problem he did it using situational language rather than behavioral language. The statement of the problem

²⁷Ibid., pp. 170-176.

should encourage freedom of thought, incorporate mutual interest, specify one objective, be brief, and share essential information. Finally, the leader needs to give assurance.²⁸

²⁸Ibid., p. 168.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF GROUP DECISION MAKING

Nietzsche has said that madness is the exception in the individual but the rule in groups. The classic novel The Ox Bow Incident well portrays group madness. Janis also writes of this in his book on "Groupthink." This phrase refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.²⁹ He coined the term to give an intentional invidious connotation. His inspiration is obviously from George Orwells' book 1984. The intention of the terminology is to call attention to the effects of group cohesiveness and conformity to group norms. These two areas of concern have great implications for chaplains. They will be dealt with in relation to Janis' central theme which is:

The more amiability and esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups.³⁰

He points to the Bay of Pigs, our failures in Korea, the events which made the Pearl Harbor invasion a possibility, and the escalation of the Vietnam War as tragic examples of groupthink. On the other hand, he points to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Marshall Plan as shining examples of good group decision making.

²⁹Irving L. Janis, Victims of Groupthink (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), p. 9.

³⁰Ibid., p. 13.

The difference between the good and bad is to be found in how group cohesiveness and conformity to group norms is dealt with in the decision making group.³¹ Fortunately groupthink can be detected. Janis gives eight major symptoms which when operational in a group decision making body can be countered. These are:

1. An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks;
2. collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions;
3. an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions;
4. stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes;
5. direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members;
6. self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments;
7. a shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent);
8. the emergence of self-appointed mindguards--members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.³²

Janis further prescribes the following methods as a means to prevent groupthink:

1. The leader of a policy-forming group should assign the

³¹Ibid., pp. 6-13. ³²Ibid., pp. 197-198.

role of critical evaluator to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to airing objections and doubts. This practice needs to be reinforced by the leader's acceptance of criticism of his own judgments in order to discourage the members from soft-pedaling their disagreements.

2. The leaders in an organization's hierarchy, when assigning a policy-planning mission to a group, should be impartial instead of stating preference and expectations at the outset. This practice requires each leader to limit his briefings to unbiased statements about the scope of the problem and the proposals he would like to see adopted. This allows the conferees the opportunity to develop an atmosphere of open inquiry and to explore impartially a wide range of policy alternatives.

3. The organization should routinely follow the administrative practice of setting up several independent policy-planning and evaluation groups to work on the same policy question, each carrying out its deliberations under a different leader.

4. Throughout the period when the feasibility and effectiveness of policy alternatives are being surveyed, the policy-making group should from time to time divide into two or more subgroups to meet separately, under different chairmen, and then come together to hammer out their differences.

5. Each member of the policy-making group should discuss periodically the group's deliberations with trusted associates in his own unit of the organization and report back their reactions.

6. One or more outside experts or qualified colleagues within the organization who are not core members of the policy-making group should be invited to each meeting on a staggered basis and should be encouraged to challenge the views of the core members.

7. At every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, at least one member should be assigned the role of devil's advocate.

8. Whenever the policy issue involves relations with a rival nation or organization, a sizable block of time (perhaps an entire session) should be spent surveying all warning signals from the rivals and constructing alternative scenarios of the rivals' intentions.

9. After reaching a preliminary consensus about what seems to be the best policy alternative, the policy-making group should hold a "second chance" meeting at which every member is expected to express as vividly as he can all his residual doubts and to rethink the entire issue before making a definite choice.³³

³³Ibid., pp. 209-219.

The matter of group cohesion and conformity to the group's norms has serious moral, ethical, and spiritual connotations for chaplains. The matter is not just a practical matter of management, but one of ethical quality of those decisions we make while using groups as decision making instruments. Perhaps the analogy that Power is amoral, but the use of that power is an ethical and moral matter is appropriate at this juncture. A group of chaplains meeting for the express purpose of making a choice can represent an indeterminable amount of mental energy and psychic capacity. The methodology used by that group and their awareness, their being in touch, with the dynamic social and psychic forces functioning within their group is a matter of grave concern to this writer. This concern has been realized many times when the matter of consensus was taken lightly while group processing Chaplain School Advanced Course assignments. There also is concern among educators for this matter of problem solving. Evidence of this concern is the Problem Solving Curriculum offered at the University of California in Los Angeles. The school offers a minor on an undergraduate level to those students who plan to go into a profession.³⁴ Daniel Wikler describes the basic features of the program:

The salient features of this and other methods used by

³⁴Harvey S. Perloff, "Knowledge to Action, Creating an Undergraduate Problem-Solving Program," American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Nov/Dec 1974): p. 211.

moral philosophers in solving moral problems are these: The reasoning is, within limits, objective, rather than purely subjective, as reasoning about value judgments is often thought to be; it can be quite precise, thereby possibly of great utility; and it is a device for effecting a rational change of attitudes, which gives support for the view that the problems under discussion are capable of being solved, rather than just being talked about.³⁵

It is this writer's hope that the matter of group decision making will be used to a greater extent within the chaplaincy, but with the realization that a little knowledge is very dangerous. More solid, serious, study needs to be done by those who use the method and by those who advocate its use.

Finally, in the spirit of Chester L. Cooper's article on the CIA it is to be hoped that when all the experts have had their say, when the situation has been analyzed, and when the best advice has been given, those in authority will use it.

³⁵Daniel Wikler, "Philosophy as Problem-Solving," American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Nov/Dec 1974): 250-259.

³⁶Chester L. Cooper, "The CIA and Decision Making, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 50 (January 1972): 223-236.

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